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BOOK REVIEW: THE MYTH OF THE GREAT ENDING BY J.M. FELSER

Reviewed by Matthew Fike

Felser, J. M. (2011). *The Myth Of The Great Ending: Why We've Been Longing For The End Of Days Since The Beginning Of Time*. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads. 271 pp.

Whether it is thought that the world will end with extreme weather, as R. Frost (1969) imagines in "Fire and Ice," or "not with a bang but a whimper," as T. S. Eliot (1973) proposes in "The Hollow Men," both poems illustrate the fact that end-of-world thinking pervades the collective consciousness. Figuring out why and what to do about it is the subject of *The Myth of the Great Ending: Why We've Been Longing for the End of Days Since the Beginning of Time*, in which J. M. Felser (2011) synthesizes insights from philosophy, mythology, psychology, and the new physics into "a useful analysis of a contagion" (p. 3) whose origin in America dates back to William Miller's prophecy that the world would end on October 22, 1844, but whose provenance lies shrouded in prehistory. What is clear, however, is that the end of the world is not an upcoming historical event but rather a myth that points us toward the possibility of greater self-knowledge and wholeness. Those who subscribe to a literal interpretation, Felser insisted, consume "junk food for the imagination . . . a deadly poison circulating in the body of human consciousness" (p. 196). He urges, as an antidote and alternative, that readers embrace the world of nature around us and our own inner nature, the unconscious.

At the heart of *The Myth of the Great Ending* lies the concept of linear time versus time as circular, a distinction that is present in the plays of W. Shakespeare, whose language provides an apt starting point. Prospero's phrase in *The Tempest*, "the dark backward and abysm of time" (1.2.50; qtd. in Bevington, 1992, p. 1531), bodies forth linear time in which the past is distant, whereas Feste's phrase in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, "the whirligig of time" (5.1.376; qtd. in Bevington, p. 361), conveys not only the cycle of life, but perhaps also the unity of all action. That is, time is a loop encompassing past, present, and future, much as all points on the circumference of a circle are equidistant from the center (perhaps a missed analogy to Focus 15, in which all time periods are available, much as spokes emanate outward from the central hub of a bicycle wheel). Although Felser did not include the bard's terminology, he did mention King Lear's "own great ending, which serves as a handy escape-hatch from the suffering of which he himself is the principal author" (p. 39). It would have been helpful to note, in addition, these questions—Kent's "Is this the promised end?" and Edgar's "Or image of that horror?" (5.3.268−69; qtd. in Bevington, p. 1217)—regarding Lear's death. Here is a perfect illustration of one of the theories that Felser debunks: the idea that the death of individual persons in the medium of linear time accounts for the Myth of the Great Ending.

There is a similar missed opportunity in the mention of W. B. Yeats's (1973) "The Second Coming," whose line, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold," Felser reads as Yeats's "own take on the Great Ending" (p. 38). More precisely, however, the phrase "widening gyre" earlier in the poem expressed Yeats's idea that history is cyclical—not a whirligig or a circle but a series of interlocking 2,000-year cones; and he probably took grim satisfaction in knowing that, though his own death was imminent, the world as he knew it was ending along with him.

The Myth of the Great Ending obviously bears strong relation to the concept of linear time; but a personal death like Lear's, extrapolated to a global scale, does not explain it. Something else must account for the shift from time as circular to time as linear, and Felser considers several alternative theories. One possibility is Zoroastrianism's pattern of creation, fall, and atonement, which Aristotle secularized into the theory that a tragedy must have a beginning, middle, and end. Felser's treatment of the *Poetics* would be more effective if he had noted that it also stated that a tragedy is "an imitation . . . of a complete action" that should take place within "a single revolution of the sun" (Aristotle, trans. 1961). Whether or not Aristotle secularized Zoroaster, the theatrical use of beginning, middle, and end fostered verisimilitude and may have arisen from simple practicality. Another possibility that Felser has considered is Joseph Campbell's "Great Reversal," a transformation in which the circle, a symbol of joy and harmony with inner and outer nature, becomes linked to destruction through the image of chariot wheels. But Felser has suggested a more fundamental cause than technology, Zoroaster, or Aristotle—namely, the Agricultural Revolution 10,000 years ago, which sparked human beings' exile from nature. Thus "the Myth of the Great Ending . . . is but the psychological residue of the unresolved trauma left by our creation of linear civilization and our rejection of nature's circular rhythms" (p. 77).

Over the last 2,000 years, religious and secular belief systems have developed to shore up our species' separation from nature. Felser mentioned St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and Jerry Falwell as proponents of the religious idea that the human mind and imagination are fallen and untrustworthy, and secular writers like René Descartes, Francis Bacon, and Carl Sagan as advocates of reason, knowledge-as-power, and the denial of intuitive/unconscious resources. The key religious observation—that human consciousness is imperfect and untrustworthy because of the Fall—led to the most beautiful sentence in the entire book: "We are mental and moral prisoners of sin, captivated by bizarre fun-house mirrors of self-deception in a charnel house of terror and lies" (p. 107). Unfortunately, in addressing the way in which religion and science challenge nature, Felser painted with too broad a brush in stating, "All our mainstream religions and philosophies are rusty, worn-out buckets. They are outdated containers of antiquated ideas about reality. . . . All are cultural vessels that are sinking fast . . . [they are] useless . . . [and even] dangerous . . . " (p. 79). Religion gets hit particularly hard because it "represents a false reunification predicated on an illusion of separation" (p. 81). Though not without some merit, these criticisms are overgeneralizations that participate in the dualism that the author criticizes elsewhere.

Like the idea that the "imperialist rational ego" separates us from others and from nature, much of Felser's argument is Jungian. One notes much common ground: discussion of the collective unconscious; interest in Tao; the unus mundus, the one world, or what Felser has called a "connection to all things" (p. 66); analysis of archaic or original cultures; experience of unity consciousness with nature; emphasis on dreams as what Jung's protégé, Marie-Louise von Franz, called "'the voice of nature within us'" (p. 67); and the realization of the unconscious mind's temporal relativity. In two places, however, the Jungian connection needs to be straightened out. The main one is where Felser erroneously defined myths as "archetypes of the collective unconscious" (p. 18). Jung (1968) stated that archetypes are not "inherited ideas . . . but inherited possibilities of ideas" (p. 66), which means that they represent merely the potential for representation. As D. Sharp stated, "Archetypes are irrepresentable in themselves but their effects are discernible in archetypal images and motifs" (1991, p. 27). Culture activates the archetype in order to create myth, which is why Jung distinguished between archetype and archetypal image—and why archetype and myth are not synonymous. Further, when Felser claimed that we are enchanted by a magical spell, it would have been worth noting that, for Jung, magical thinking is so-called "primitive" thinking, for which Jung borrowed L. Lévy-Bruhl's term participation mystique—a subjective view having no clear demarcation between psychic content and outer experience, versus the allegedly objective view that Western science promotes. Since the fear of change from a magical mentality toward greater differentiation and objectivity was a major factor that kept the belief system of primitive peoples homogeneous, could it be that the Agricultural Revolution generated an ongoing fear of the unknown that now manifests as the Myth of the Great Ending? If so, then it is not just the separation from nature that fuels the myth but also fear of the unfolding alternatives.

The first half of The Myth of the Great Ending analyzes the myth itself, the second half discusses how to address it, and the final third deals primarily with two exemplary persons who successfully shifted their paradigms—J. Roberts, who channeled the entity known as Seth, and R. A. Monroe. In the first half, Felser showed that the Great Ending was never "a mass public event" and is now "a museum piece, an antique, not a living, breathing myth" (pp. 99−101). For the remainder of the text, it becomes a metaphor for self-transformation via intuition, creative insight, D. Bohm's "in-seeing," inner vision, the right brain, the unconscious, the Higher Self, holism (versus dualism or reductionism), and a proper connection with nature. Thus the only "world" to be destroyed is an individual person's outworn belief system. We must "unlearn all that has been so assiduously learned—that is what ends our personal world" and what enables, in Monroe's parlance, a "'different overview'" (p. 186, 102). Felser is referring to such pernicious assumptions as the following: consciousness is biochemical, imperfect, and untrustworthy; the supernatural is unnecessary; self-knowledge is impossible; and the only reliable knowledge comes from external authority. He should have pushed a step further and stated, as would Jung, that we should stop projecting our inner dysfunction in the form of the Great Ending and tend to our own psychic gardens in order to move from the "self," which

Felser has used to refer to individuality, to the "Self," the archetype of wholeness. (The title of chapter 6, "To thine own self," borrowed from Shakespeare's Polonius in *Hamlet*—"to thine own self be true" [1.3.78; qtd. in Bevington, p. 1072], refers to financial self-interest and material well-being, not individuation, and is taken out of context.) The solution, then, is both Jungian and Taoist: if we plumb the "dark depths" (p. 78) and do our shadow work in order to become more in tune with who we really are, then the outer world will mirror our progress.

The greater worldview that may be achieved is akin to the expanded consciousness of the lightning shaman among indigenous peoples. Felser cites a modern American example, Tony Cicoria, and might well have discussed Dannion Brinkley's (1995) similar experience in Saved by the Light. Just as Cicoria's lightning-induced NDE unlocked musical ability, so Brinkley—a hard-nosed businessman who had been a sniper in Vietnam—developed psychic abilities that he now uses to help others. Felser believes that Roberts and Monroe, along with Socrates and Black Elk, are in a similar category. In particular, Monroe receives great praise for overcoming his fears and for becoming "a mystic, psychic, and philosopher whose passage through our culture may yet prove to be one of the most creative disturbances witnessed by the 20th century—or any other" (p. 163).

Regarding the lightning shaman, Felser wondered what happens when one is struck by lightning. Does a lightning strike rewire the nervous system, or does it just wipe away the cultural software and return the brain to its default setting? He does not know, but he should have pointed out the obvious analogy to what he says later on about Hemi-Sync®. Like the latter view of lightning, Monroe's sound technology "is essentially what I would call a blinder-removal tool, an anti-technology technology, or a cultural deprogramming device. Properly speaking, Hemi-Sync isn't a vehicle that takes you to some other place; it just helps you remove the narrow limits on your natural, wider perception. Then you can see what is—and that you are, in fact, already—There. Which is, of course, right Here" (p. 185). To those who would become psychic or at least more in tune with nature, Felser's advice would be simply to turn down the cultural noise and to "become aware of what we are already doing and being, of the full range of operations of our consciousness" above and below the level of waking awareness (p. 185).

Felser's treatment of Monroe is a fine reading that draws extensively on his three books and Ronald Russell's (2007) biography, *The Journey of Robert Monroe: From Out-of-Body Explorer to Consciousness Pioneer*. Felser acknowledges the value of Bayard Stockton's (1989) *Catapult: The Biography of Robert A. Monroe*, despite its dependence on the interview format. One of the differences between these books, however, is highly relevant to Felser's argument and should have been mentioned: Russell overlooks Stockton's emphasis on Monroe's interest in the Earth changes. If Stockton's account is to be believed, then Monroe himself was not immune to some degree of the Myth of the Great Ending. One further disconnection is worth noting. Felser has quoted Monroe's (1971) description, from *Journeys*

Out of the Body, chapter 8, of the place he affectionately called “Home” (pp. 123−125), a heaven where sights and sounds are perfect; but Monroe (1994) later stated in *Ultimate Journey* that “Home” is a false heaven operating on “a repeating loop” and that the resulting boredom is why his spirit had struck out for new destinations in the first place (p. 26). “Home” is “a blind alley” (p. 209). Had Felser mentioned the whole story of “Home,” he could have used Monroe’s realization to illustrate a key principle that comes near the end of the book: “The final lesson, of course, is: There is no final lesson, no different overview that is not, in the end, merely provisional” (p. 206).

Felser’s advice to readers, which borrows especially from Roberts and Monroe but also from Jung and Campbell, breaks down into two categories. The first contains habits of mind. Felser advises what Roberts called “psychic naturalism,” which “blasts the human imagination wide open, freeing it from the decaying rusty shackles of all the prevailing shopworn myths of the past, including and especially the Myth of the Great Ending in its more literal, stupefying versions” (p. 152). In order to describe Monroe’s experiences, Felser has coined two further terms: *radical iconoclasm*, in which “radical” implies a thorough, complete inquiry into the root causes of something, and iconoclasm suggests a willingness to shatter preconceptions; and *radical empiricism*, in which radical means inclusive of nonphysical experience, and empiricism holds that experience always trumps belief. Felser’s second wave of advice concerns actual behaviors—ways to end one’s own world. Following Jung, he urges us to spend time in nature, record our dreams, and create art. He also counsels us to follow our dreams, or as Campbell stated, to “follow your bliss” (p. 127).

The Myth of the Great Ending deals with heavyweight ideas in a clear, accessible, and sometimes even folksy style (e.g., “‘Whatever floats your boat,’ as the saying goes” [p. 113]). It takes a deeply learned, masterful writer to communicate complex concepts effectively to a general audience, and in this respect the book is highly successful. Yet the most engaging sections are not those that are philosophical or psychological but those in which the author—our fellow explorer—shares his own experiences. These include dreams and visions that foretold 9/11, an experience of Itzhak Bentov’s idea of the “oscillating universe,” a beautiful experience in which a lucid dream became an OBE, and a discussion with a colleague who helped him put his work life in proper perspective.

One may surmise, in conclusion, that Felser is a man whose lifestyle illustrates Jung’s (1967) idea that “Nature must not win the game, but she cannot lose” (p. 184). Jung means that, though the unconscious should not be allowed to overcome the gains that consciousness has made, we must augment reason and technology by reconnecting with the nature within us and around us. If nature is ignored, it will bite us, much as the unconscious compensates for consciousness. It appears from the biography at the end of the book that Felser has struck such a balance: “He and his wife, along with their golden retriever, make their home in suburban New Jersey but get away to Maine whenever they can” (n.p.). He might disagree, but

he has evidently taken to heart the emphasis that the Myth of the Great Ending "serves as a coded reminder of the true magic that is still available in the present moment when we choose to align ourselves with nature and with our own true, deepest nature" (p. 209).

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